

# *The unity of the Ireland manuscript*

Article

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## THE UNITY OF THE IRELAND MANUSCRIPT

It is now widely recognised that certain classes of mediaeval texts, in particular anonymous, popular works of fiction in the vernacular, such as Middle English romances, do not always readily lend themselves to the traditional techniques of critical editing. The variations between different manuscript copies are often impossible to treat as corruptions of an original text, and in many cases, each separate manuscript copy demands the status of an independent version of a common original.

In these circumstances, it is often most rewarding to consider as the literary unit to be studied, not the individual work of fiction, but the whole manuscript collection in which it is found. The literary achievement of the compiler or editor of this collection is to be seen in his choice and adaptation of his material in accord with discernible editorial principles. These principles can be studied by the comparison of the compiler's version of each text with all other available copies, looking for clear evidence of real and apparently deliberate alterations to an earlier version, to form part of a continuous literary effect.

A very suitable subject for study of this kind is found in the Ireland Manuscript.

The book known as the Ireland Manuscript<sup>1</sup> has been conclusively shown by Bruce Dickins<sup>2</sup> to consist of two quite separate manuscripts bound together. The first part, with which I am concerned, contains three metrical romances: *The Awntyrs of Arthure*, *Sir Amadace*, and *The Avowyng of Arther*, written in one hand continuously through five quires. The second part contains records and memoranda of the manor of Hale, Lancashire, apparently copied into the manuscript from the original court records, dealing with the years 1413-36, together with contemporary entries for the reign of Edward IV.

The Ireland Manuscript has been edited by John Robson for the Camden Society: *Three Early English Metrical Romances*, London, 1842. Apart from his modernisation of capitals and some orthographical forms, Robson's text is, as Dickins observes, 'remarkably accurate', and I shall refer to it here.

At first sight, the three romances in this book are obviously dissimilar: they are all written in different verse forms. The first is an alliterative rhyming stanza, common to a small body of ME works including *Golagros and Gawane*, *Rauf Coilzear*, *Somer Sondag*, and *Buke of the Howlat*. The second is in the familiar twelve-line tail-rhyme stanza; and the third is in the less common sixteen-line alliterative tail-rhyme stanza, found also in *Sir Perceval* and *Sir Degrevant*.

On the other hand, all three are divided into three fitts where all the comparable texts are not; all three show distinctive West Midland features in orthography and inflexional endings which seem to have been imposed upon more northerly original texts; and all three contain many lines which are too long for the metre on account of added phrases, the most common of which are of the type: 'he said', 'quoth he'. These superficial similarities suggest that where the romances have been altered, it was the work of the same hand, and the suggestion is supported upon examination of the three poems by the number of peculiarities of style and subject-treatment which they share.

*The Awntyrs of Arthur* exists in four manuscript versions: the Ireland, Thornton (MS Lincoln 91), Lambeth (MS Lambeth 491), and Douce (MS Douce 324). A critical edition of these four texts has been published by R.J. Gates<sup>3</sup>.

The major idiosyncrasies of the Ireland version may be said to derive from an apparent interest on the editor's or scribe-editor's part in an overall harmony: the jerky rhythm natural to the alliterative line is to some extent ironed out by spacing out the clusters of stressed consonants with many added unstressed syllables; the syntax of a more original version, with its frequent adjectival or adverbial use of the formulaic alliterative half-line, is smoothed by conjunctions and adverbs into a more fluent style; any unintelligible references are rationalised, and inconsistencies and weaknesses of logic are tidied and tightened up. All these features of its style contribute to the apparent concern shown in this copy of *Awntyrs* for the clear presentation of the moral interpretation of the story.

Gates notes several peculiarities of the I-version, the most striking single example of which is the marked preference it shows for the formulaic phrase *Gawayne* (or *Gaynour*) *the gode* where no other manuscript has the phrase, though some have instead *Gawayne/Gaynour the gay*. Although *gode* and *gay* are virtually interchangeable alliterative counters, it is nevertheless interesting that the I-scribe chooses this

word, as if concentrating on these characters as representative of the moral qualities of the court rather than of its brilliance.

One of the I-scribe's concerns is for the common sense of his copy, and he makes several alterations where he finds a word or reference obscure, for example, in stanza XXII, where instead of the problematic reference to the Tiber or Tamar:

Then shal a Tyber vntrue tymber ȝour tene;

he substitutes a further prophecy about the loss of the Round Table:

Hit schalle be tynte, as I troue, and timburt with tene.

Similarly, in stanza XXXVIII, where MS Douce has *krudely þe erlis sone of kent*, which probably represents some corrupted proper name, the I-scribe has rationalised it as an adverb, *kindeli*.

The same rationalising attitude is discernible behind the I-scribe's other characteristic alterations. He consistently changes phrases in which an idea is uneconomically expressed, for example in the phrase *crucified on croys*, which the other manuscripts have in stanzas XI and XVIII: the idea of the cross is already contained in the word *crucified*. In Ireland the phrase is *clarifiet on crosse*, which in each case enriches the meaning of the whole line in stanza XI:

As Thou was claryfiet on crosse, and clanser of synne,

it draws upon the sense of 'purified', 'spiritualised' to link *claryfiet* with *clanser*; and in stanza XVIII:

As he was claryfiet on crosse, and crounet with thorne,

there is an ironic opposition between *clarifiet* ('glorified') and *crounet*, and *crosse* and *thorne*.

Again, in stanza XVI, instead of the repetitive *wo is me for þi wo*, the I-scribe has *Wa ys me for thi worde*, which introduces a new idea of fated punishment, and adds to the moral force of the passage.

The most important example of this tendency is stanza XX. Here, while the other manuscripts give a rather selective list of Christian virtues, in which the attempted order of merit is very confused, Ireland succeeds in making good sense of the ghost's advice, and is alone in recognising the passage as the central point of the poem, both artistic-ly and morally.

*Thornton, Lambeth, Douce*

Mekenesse and mercy, þes arne þe  
moost,  
Haue pite one þe poer, þat pleses  
heuenking;

*Ireland*

Mesure and mekenes, that is the  
most,  
Haue pete of the pore, that plesus  
the kinge;

Sipene charite is cheff, and þene is  
   chaste,  
 And þene almesse-dede cure of al  
   þing.

Sethyn charite is chefe to those  
   that wyn be chast,  
 Almesdede, that is aure alle other  
   thingus.

*Mercy*, meaning much the same as *pite*, is replaced by *mesure*, which suggests the justice of giving to the poor; and the noun *chaste*, 'chastity', which rather intrudes into the list of neighbourly virtues, is replaced by the adjective *chast*, 'perfect', 'holy'; so that the clause *those that wyn be chast* parallels *that plesus the kinge* in the previous line, and adds a greater sense of purpose to the passage. By tightening up the structure of these four lines, Ireland links them more clearly to the ghost's original warning in stanzas XIV–XV:

Haue pete on the pore, quyl thou hase pouere...

For the prayer of the pore may purchase thi pece;

and makes them more relevant to the situation of the court; only Ireland makes Gaynour ask advice for *vs* rather than for *me* (XX). The focal point of the sentence is *almesdede*, which is not here another virtue, but rather an opportunity for the practical exercise of charity; and by giving it such a prominent place in the verse, Ireland makes sure it has the desired impact. By contrast, the feeble syntactic structure in the other manuscripts has far less effect as a 'moral link between the two parts of the poem'. There are plenty of other instances of this kind of rewriting in the Ireland version.

Finally, Ireland makes much more use than other versions of verbal echo to press the connexion between the ghost's warnings and the behaviour of the court. For example, the feast at *Rondalle-sete halle* recalls her words about luxury:

With alle dayntethis on dese thi dietis ar digte (XV)

Vndur a seler of sylke with dayntethis digte (XXVII)

Again, Gaynour's address to the king echoes the ghost's words to her:

Qwen thou art ray richest and rydus in thi route (XIV)

Sayd 'As thou art ray richist, and rialle in rente...' (XLIX)

And the dance-of-death image (XIII) in Ireland alone includes a *Duke*: this is a clear warning to Gawain, whom Arthur makes a duke in stanza LII.

*Sir Amadace* is found in two manuscripts: the Ireland, and Edinburgh MS. Advocates Library 19.3.1. The two versions differ considerably: hardly any two parallel lines are identical, and there are substantial additions or omissions of whole or part stanzas. A. McI. Trounce<sup>5</sup> is clearly correct when he concludes that the Advocates version is the better tail-rhyme poem, more in 'the tail-rhyme manner' as he defines

it, but one cannot deduce that it represents the original version from which the Ireland text is derived. Both texts show a high degree of independent adaptation.

The Ireland *Amadace* resembles *Awntyrs* in the fluency of its rhythm and syntax. It is characterised by its formal and balanced style in comparison with the more vigorous and informal style of the Advocates version: stanzas II–III provide a good example. In Ireland, *Amadace* deliberates in an unemotional way, simply stating one by one the points of his argument; he employs the minimum of rhetorical colour, and preserves for the most part the word-order of common speech. The Advocates version is more immediately striking as direct speech rather than rendered with colourful individual effects.

The narrative divisions of the two versions depend upon wholly different structural ideas. Advocates has simply one chronological break at line 596. In Ireland the poem is divided into three fitts, the disposition of which shows a sensitive grasp of narrative structure. The first fitt (I–XVII) is chiefly concerned with the past: it describes the parallel fortunes of *Amadace* and the merchant. The second fitt (XVIII–XLIII) returns to the present and shows *Amadace* in action, plunging ever further into misfortune, until with the arrival of the White Knight right in the middle of the poem, his affairs take an upward swing. The third fitt (XLIV–LXXII) shows *Amadace*'s rise to good fortune and a lull in the action (LV), until the second appearance of the White Knight provides the climax of the poem, a false return to misfortune, and a final happy ending.

This narrative competence can be seen throughout the poem. There is a careful avoidance of loose story ends which is particularly noticeable in the stanzas peculiar to this version. Stanza XXVI adds nothing new to the narrative, for the merchant summarises for the townspeople the events of the past hundred-odd lines, yet it provides a satisfactory conclusion to the merchant's part in the story leaving him content and full of admiration for Sir *Amadace*. Stanza XLVIII gives a detailed account of *Amadace*'s answers to the king's messengers, whereas in Advocates the case which they report to the king has to be supplied by the reader from the previous stanzas. The last two stanzas in Ireland provide a summary of everybody's fortunes: the steward and other members of *Amadace*'s household are finally recalled in fulfilment of *Amadace*'s promise, and *Amadace* himself in time becomes king as the old king promised. These developments are left to the reader's imagination in the Advocates version.

Ireland's interest in developing the links between different incidents in the story can be seen in other ways. For example, when the White Knight appears to claim his half of Amadace's goods (LIX and LXVII), his words echo very closely those used by Amadace and himself when making their bargain in the forest (XLII–XLIII).

The Ireland *Amadace* (like *Awntyrs*) has clearly been altered, with a moral purpose. Sir Amadace in this version is serious, formal, pious, and above all, knightly. Five stanzas which are not in *Advocates* (XXVI, XXXIX, XLVIII, LXXI–LXXII) are devoted to exemplifying his virtues and his knightly status. None of these stanzas is essential to the narrative, but each has a part in establishing a moral context for the story. Stanza XXVI gives an account of how Amadace's generosity appears to the merchant: the apparently great wealth on which he drew, and the speed with which he produced it, convince the merchant that he is a 'full riall knyghte'. Stanza XXXIX shows the White Knight explaining to Amadace how his generosity fits into the pattern of Christian redemption: largesse is presented as a way of carrying on Christ's spending of Himself in the world. Stanza XLVIII shows Amadace claiming the wealth and luxuries necessary for the exercise of largesse, which he may be assumed once to have had, and spent; the shipwreck is a figure of his wrecked fortunes. Stanzas LXXI–LXXII show Amadace at last restored to wealth and security, and fulfilling once more the rôle of the ideal knight, both through his largesse, and his adherence to his word in summoning all his men as he has promised.

These additional stanzas do not obtrude on the rest of the narrative, for the same interest in clarifying the moral interpretation of the story is noticeable throughout the poem. In stanza XXII, for example, Amadace presents a clearly reasoned argument as to why, for the good of his soul, the merchant should have mercy on the debtor; in *Advocates*, Amadas' reasoning depends upon more worldly arguments. Similarly, in stanza XXIV, the Ireland *Amadace* is concerned with the spiritual welfare of the dead man: his 'cristun beringe', unlike the *Advocates'* interest in his worldly honour. As a final example, one may take Amadace's reaction to the thought of killing his wife (LXIII). In Ireland, he sees his dilemma as a conflict of two sworn loyalties: to his wife and his 'brother', and to break his faith with either of them would clearly be a 'grete synne'; he acknowledges the truth of the White Knight's claim, but puts forward a strong argument against it. In *Advocates*, he seems more resigned to the necessity of killing his wife, uttering only a sigh of regret: 'methink grete rupe it were'.

Amadace's knightliness in Ireland is equally emphasised in the details of social class. His income is set at a figure which puts him into the class permitted to wear ermine and cloth-of-gold, according to the sumptuary laws of 1363 (above 400 marks p.a.); and in stanzas XLIV–XLV, where he discovers the cast-up treasure, *meneuere* and *gold webbe* are specifically mentioned; both fabrics being reserved by the sumptuary laws to those of the rank of knight banneret or above, and being regarded by the nobility as indicative of their social position<sup>6</sup>.

*The Avowynge of King Arther* is an unique copy, so all that can be done is to point out those things in it which seem remarkable in the context of the rest of the manuscript.

In verse form it falls between *Awntyrs* and *Amadace*. Like the first, it begins and ends with the same words; its basic four-line unit is similar to the wheel of *Awntyrs*' stanza; both poems use heavy alliteration together with rhyme; and there is even some trace in *Avowynge* of the stanza-linking which is so marked in the Ireland *Awntyrs* (e.g., in XI–XII, XV–XVI). On the other hand, it shares the discipline of the tail-rhyme structure with *Amadace*; and though the scale of the alliteration is like that of *Awntyrs*, the use of alliteration in individual lines often resembles more closely the usage of *Amadace*.

In content, *Avowynge* resembles the other two poems in several striking ways. Like *Awntyrs*, it is set in 'Ingulwud forest', 'besyde the Tarnewathelan', near the king's castle 'atte Carlele'. Both poems begin with a scene showing Arthur's court out hunting, and predictably share some hunting vocabulary. Menealfe and Gawain resolve their differences in stanza XXXVII using exactly the same phrase as do Gawain and Galrun in *Awntyrs* stanza LIV; 'gode frindus ar thay' (where all other versions have a completely different line).

The resemblances to *Amadace* are more numerous, and nearly all come in the second part, the testing of Baldwin. Baldwin's second vow: 'Nere werne nomon my mete / quen I gode may gete' (IX), and his statement of the principle behind it:

He that gode may gete,  
And wernys men of his mete,  
Gud Gode that is grete  
Gif him sory care. (LXXI)

echo the widow's description to Amadace of her husband's conduct: 'Quil he hade any gud to take / He wernut no mon for Goddus sake' (XIII; peculiar to Ireland). Equally, Baldwin's reasoning resembles



the White Knight's explanation to Amadace:

'Sir, God hase a gud pluge,  
He may send vs alle enughe,  
Qwy schuld we spare?'

'Repente the noȝte, that thou hase  
done,  
For he that schope bothe sunne and  
mone,  
Fulle wele may pay for all.'

(*Avowyng*e XLIX)

(*Amadace* XXXIX)

The descriptions of largesse as practised by Baldwin, Amadace and the merchant are also very close, for example:

There was no spense for to spare,  
Burdes thay were neuyr bare,  
Butte euyr court clene.

For his mete he wold not spare,  
Burdes in the halle were neuyr bare,  
With clothes richeli digte.

(*Avow*. XLVIII)

(*Am*. XIV; peculiar to Ireland).

Indeed, the whole of stanza XLVI in *Avowyng*e could well describe the experience of a stranger at the house of Amadace or the merchant.

Both *Avowyng*e and *Amadace* express similar moral sentences, for example:

'A mon's happe is not ay,  
Is nonè so sekur of a say,  
Butte he may hames hente'.

For gud his butte a lante lone,  
Sum tyme men haue hit, sum tyme  
none,  
Thou hast fulle mony a pere!

(*Avow*. XXVIII)

(*Am*. XXXVIII)

and both share an insistence on the necessity of keeping one's word, for example:

And thou hase holdinne alle that  
thou higte  
As a knigte schulde.

'Ye schalle him hold that ȝe haue  
higte,  
Be God, and Sayn Driztine.'

(*Avow*. LXXII)

(*Am*. LXIV)

Finally, both poems end on a similar note: the hero is praised after successfully passing the test, and is told to appreciate the virtues of his lady.

All this evidence suggests that the Ireland MS represents the work of a single compiler, making alterations to his chosen texts according to certain consistent principles; and it remains to suggest what his purpose may have been, and his reason for choosing these three romances to form a collection.

Of the three romances, two belong to the Arthurian tradition, in particular to the English tradition of short, separate adventure-stories featuring Arthur (in a diminished rôle) and his knights (chiefly Sir Gawain), the best of which achieve a skilful fusion of traditional adventure material and refined moral themes.

The *Awntyrs* has been discussed by W. Matthews<sup>7</sup>, who calls it 'a composite romance with two main themes and a moral intent', and describes its two-part structure as follows:

In a confrontation of the pride of life with a *memento mori*, the first part states the moral principles of Christian world contempt: the second part is given over to a story that illustrates those principles and in which the characters of part one are protagonists.

However, while this outline is correct, the Ireland version is divided differently in the manuscript, into three fitts, and a more subtle structure can be seen by examining it in this way.<sup>8</sup>

In the first fitt (I–XX), during the conventional hunt with which the poem opens, an atmospheric change heralds the appearance of a ghost to Gawain and Gynour. She comes with a warning of the inevitability of death, and begins her message on the common themes of 'how are the mighty fallen', 'all flesh is grass', and 'vanity of vanities, all is vanity'. She uses the conventional examples of rich clothes and food to illustrate the sins of pride and luxury, and preaches an abstract of the parable of Dives and Lazarus against them (XIV). What is interesting about the ghost's message at this point is that stanza XIV is in fact a partial statement of the moral of *Amadace*: 'show charity to the poor while you are rich and have power to do so, when men flock about you; for when your body is embalmed and on the bier, those who now praise you will soon leave you, and nothing will help you but the holy prayers of the poor'. This recalls *Amadace*, stanzas XIII–XV, XXVII, XXXIV, etc. The ghost, like the White Knight in *Amadace*, is concerned with the common theme of transience, especially of worldly goods, and with the need to spend one's wealth to save one's soul. Gynour promises prayers and good works for her mother's soul, but, aware of the profound warning in the ghost's words, asks what sin most angers Christ, and is told 'pride'. On behalf of the whole court, she asks what good works may save them from their sins, and is told 'mesure, mekenes, pete of the pore, charite, almesdede'. This stanza (XX) is the focal point of the poem: the whole first fitt leads up to it, and its precepts illuminate the rest of the story.

The second fitt (XXI–XXXVIII) concerns the problem of just war: Gawain, clearly disturbed by the ghost's stern words about pride, asks what will become of the Round Table, showing by his own words the injustice of their exploits in war: *defoules, orerennus, agaynes the ryghtus* (XXI). The traditional ideals of chivalry, worship, and prowess, appear in this context as vainglory and brute force. In reply the ghost blames the king's covetousness, and foretells the downfall of the

whole Round Table, including Gawain's death. With the sudden brightening of the sky, it is as if the characters awaken from a nightmare and resume normal merrymaking; but the real danger is to come, for during the feast a lady and a knight appear to challenge the court in the name of 'resun and ryzte'. The knight complains that he is a victim of the very wrongful conquests which Gawain has acknowledged: 'thou hase wonun on werre with thi wrang wiles' (XXXIII), and demands a fair fight to settle it. This is a second chance for the knights of the Round Table to show true chivalry rather than mere militarism.

In the third fitt (XL–LV) Gawain and Galeron meet and fight until Galeron's lady cries to Gaynour to 'haue pety of zondur nobulle knygte', and she, remembering the ghost's advice of pity and meekness, goes humbly to kneel crownless to the king and asks him to make peace. But before he can, Galeron voluntarily releases his right to Gawain. The king then enfeoffs Gawain of lands in Wales if he will restore the Scottish lands to Galeron, which he immediately does. All these transactions are couched in the formal language of lawful land-tenure in contrast to the rapine suggested by Gawain in stanza XXI. Finally, Gaynour with true charity arranges 'a meliun of massus' for her mother's soul. Thus, the last fitt shows how the ghost's advice is heeded. Unrighteous conquest is replaced by honourable combat and proper knightly settlement. In asking the ghost's advice, Gawain's concern was with the degeneration of knightly standards into the mere force of might; in following the Christian precepts of charity, moderation and pity he restores the court's honour by reviving the Christian principles of their knightly code.

*Amadace*, the second romance, which shows greater signs of adaptation than *Awntyrs*, seems to have been rewritten with two main aims: to amplify the moral organisation of the story, and to stress Amadace's knighthood and knightly virtues. One reason for this necessity is that Amadace, not being a knight of the Arthurian court, could not be assumed to possess all the conventional virtues. The Ireland version presents Christian knightly ideals through the two virtues of largesse and loyalty, which are taken to represent the rest. Largesse is described by G. Mathew as 'prodigal generosity, perhaps primarily valued because of the detachment from possession and the disregard for wealth that it implies. Its moral is suggested by the statement that the good knight must be without the desire to amass treasure and riches'. Amadace shows both sides of this virtue: in hospitality and almsgiving to the poor, who 'lay his hert nere', and in showering gifts on his men. In Ireland alone, he also acts towards the king with

largesse, when he gives him half of his winnings (LI). But although detailed examples are not necessary, it is important that Amadace should be known to possess the other qualities of the perfect knight. His piety is amply exemplified throughout the poem; his pity, or compassion, is clearly shown in the episode with the widow; and his thirst for justice appears in his desire that the debtor have 'his rigte'. The story does not give scope for much testimony of his prowess, except that he bore off all the prizes in the jousting, but Ireland makes a point of mentioning Amadace's chivalric qualities in stanza XLIX, where he is said to be 'stithe on stede', and to gain the king's love by his horsemanship. The courtly virtues of 'franchise' and courtesy are also well marked in Ireland. A simple example is the word *fre* which occurs seven times (but only once in *Advocates*), meaning well-born, noble, honourable, or liberal. When Amadace welcomes his 'true fere' (LVIII-LIX), in the Ireland version it is he himself who attempts to act as ostler and usher for his friend in a spontaneous show of friendship. It is his courtesy which leads him to address his servants politely as 'gode stuard' (III) and 'gode sirs' (XXX); and in a significant passage (XXVIII) leads him to show his noble birth by humbly concealing it and doing honour to the 'grattust maystur' of the city.

The account of Amadace's feelings for his wife in Ireland can also be attributed to the interest in portraying knightly courtesy. The description of their falling in love (LII) is much more significant than *Advocates'* matter-of-fact account: it is an example of the instant, unique and irrevocable love-bond which appears so frequently in courtly literature. When the White Knight finally advises Amadace to 'lufe this lady as thi lyue' he is only reassuring the confused husband that his knightly principles have been correct all along.

The concept which underpins the whole structure of knightly virtue is that of honour; and the Ireland version shows a better understanding of it than the other. For example, the word *fowle* (adj. and adv.) is peculiar to Ireland, and has a more specific meaning than the parallel word *badde* in *Advocates*, indicating what kind of badness is in question: dishonour.

The interrelation of virtue, rank and wealth is of particular importance in a society which considers largesse as one of its principal ideals. The ideal hero necessarily comes of noble birth and has great riches at his disposal; at least, that is the received idea exploited by late romances such as *Sir Amadace*, *Sir Cleges* and *The Squyr of Lowe Degre*. The vocabulary of Ireland frequently gives a more precise

indication of the characters' elevated social class than do the parallel words in *Advocates*; for example, in stanza XLI where the White Knight prophesies how Amadace will regain his fortune, there are three key words which have specific knightly meanings, and are predictably French loan words: *sute*, *mennè*, *feyce*; whereas the equivalent words in *Advocates*: *feylyschyppe*, *folke*, *pey* and *hete*, are all (except *pey*) words of OE origin having less precise meaning, and with distinctly non-courtly connotations. The social significance of Amadace's income bracket has already been noted.

The three fitt structure of the poem accords with Ireland's interpretation of the story of the dispendious knight as an example of Christian salvation through the exercise of knightly virtue: it shows the three stages of his progress 'till heuyn the redy way'. In *Oliver of Castile* (a later analogue of the *Amadace* story<sup>10</sup>), these three stages are symbolised by the colours of Oliver's armour on the days of the three jousts: black, red, and white; and they are defined by the White Knight as 'obscurete, purgatorye, and saluacyon'. In *Amadace* the parallel is plain. The first fitt shows Amadace as yet unenlightened as to the true nature of largesse and the need for his suffering; forced by his poverty into social obscurity and exile. In the second, he suffers further hardships (through his own good action) even to the point of losing faith in the ideal of largesse. But he is corrected in this heretical view by the teaching of the White Knight, and given hope in the future by his promises. In the third fitt he undergoes the final trial which proves to be his salvation, and that of his honour, fortune and friends.

The real hero of the *Avowynge* is Sir Bawdewyn of Bretan, a little-known knight of the Round Table, whose lack of a conventional characterisation makes him very suitable as the hero of this untypical Arthurian tale. Like *Awntyrs*, this romance has been criticised for its alleged split structure. E. Greenlaw<sup>11</sup> considers that the second part in which Bawdewyn's vows are tested, is 'tacked on, and bears no organic relation to the preceding incidents in which Arthur and the other knights perform their vows'. He describes the whole romance as a 'curious jumble of materials drawn from conventional chivalric romances'. To some extent this criticism of the poet's eclectic method cannot be denied. But it is possible to justify both the method and the divided structure of the poem by examining its arrangement into three fitts, when the conceptual plan of the poem emerges quite clearly.

In the first fitt (I-XXX) the conventional chivalric romance elements are most marked. The praise of the knights of the Round Table, the boar hunt, the making of vows to do adventurous deeds, the challenge to a strange knight, and the encounter for a lady's sake, can all readily be paralleled in other ME romances. In fact, this section consists of a series of self-conscious set-pieces, the longest being the boar hunt. In answer to the huntsman's challenge, the king vows to kill the boar before day, and bids his knights make vows too; but all their vows having no external stimulus, seem rather makeshift. Gawain and Kay try to enter into the adventurous spirit, but make what seem pointless vows: Gawain to watch Tarnewathelan all night, and Kay to ride through the forest all night and fight anyone who might stop him. Bawdewyn, on the other hand, as Greenlaw observes, really vows to do nothing at all, but to continue to act according to his principles: never to be jealous of his wife, or to refuse anyone food, or to fear his death (IX). His vows are not chosen at random, but together make up a basic code of knightly conduct: bravery, generosity, and respect for women. Bawdewyn then returns home, leaving the others to pass an uncomfortable night in the woods. The king achieves his vow to kill the boar, and 'for werre slidus he on slepe'. Next, Kay encounters a knight (Menealfe) abducting a maiden, and oversteps the terms of his vow to leap out and challenge him. The whole encounter is conducted according to conventional cues, but the righteous challenger untypically loses, because he is the accident-prone Kay<sup>12</sup>. This provides a reason for Gawain's uneventful vow: he is needed to rescue Kay; and in stanza XXX they all three meet to come home.

The second fitt (XXXI-XLVIII) is a transitional one, and in light-hearted mood. It is significant that Menealfe is delivered into the queen's *wille* rather than the king's in view of the later discussion of woman's will; but the queen acts as a dutiful wife and gives him to the king. Having sorted out the night's adventures, the entertainment devolves upon Bawdewyn and his vows. His last two vows are tested by the king with an ambush and an unknown visitor, and are proved held. There is a strong contrast between the Kay/Menealfe encounter and the brush with Bawdewyn. There the reasons for the fight were strictly conventional and adventurous; in Bawdewyn's case the reasons are practical:

I haue my ways for to weynde  
For to speke with a frynde

(XLI)

For I am in my wais rizte,  
ȝistur euyn I the king higte  
To cumme to my mete.

(XLII)

His sense of justice and his courtesy (not wishing to break an engagement) provoke him to what is a just fight. It is his modesty and good manners which prevent him from disclosing the encounter to the king.

In the third fitt (XLIX–LXXII), however, the king enters fully into the testing of Bawdewyn's first vow. This passage is the longest in the poem on a single subject (14 stanzas), and it seems to be treated as the most interesting episode: it is centrally placed, the order being: tests, 2–3–1, explanations, 1–2–3. The king sends Bawdewyn out hunting and sets up a trick test by forcing Bawdewyn's wife and a knight to lie in bed together. This is a common conventional motif, but it is here employed in a new, less serious way than usual. As with the conventional motifs of the vowing and the challenging, it is Bawdewyn's function to provide a new, humane alternative to the traditional reaction, which in this case would probably have been to behead the knight and banish the lady. Instead, he explains that if the knight has slept with his wife it must have been at her own will, and that he would be wrong to be angry, for they have lived together a long time without her causing him any sorrow – he leaves it to God to deal with her sins. The story which Bawdewyn tells to explain his liberal attitude<sup>13</sup> shows him again refusing to pass sentence on a woman's sins, but by consulting her own will, preserving the customs of the castle. Bawdewyn explains his second vow (never to fear his death) by an anecdote showing that the coward is no more secure from danger than the brave knight in battle, and from this he draws the principle:

For dede neuyr to be drery

Welcum is hit.

Hit is a kyndely thing.

(LXVI)

These two concerns: with knightly bravery and prowess, and with a Christian readiness for one's end, are of course reminiscent of the crucial interests of *Awntyrs*. The third story illustrates closely the theme of *Amadace*, as shown above, p.52.

Thus, Bawdewyn's vows may be said to draw together the themes present in the whole collection. The two which receive less attention in *Avowyngge* are major themes of *Awntyrs* and *Amadace*, while the vow relating to women is the special concern of *Avowyngge*, where it functions as the central example of Bawdewyn's essentially liberal and humane code of conduct. As has been pointed out, Bawdewyn's vows constitute a summary code of knightly virtue. Bawdewyn and his wife behave at all times with exemplary courtesy, and their conduct is consistently praised and admired by the king and other knights;



Bawdewyn is presented and accepted in the story as a representative of ideal knightly values. His values, however, do not oppose the traditional ideal of knighthood represented by Gawain in stanza XXXIV, but they complement it, and relate the knightly code to social situations other than the conventional fictions of chivalric adventure. In fact, this is in one way the function of the whole collection.

The Ireland MS may be said to be about the rôle of civilian knights. The story of *Awntyrs* is indeed conventionally martial, but the moral precepts stated in the first fitt and followed in the last are those of the Christian way of salvation, equally applicable to knights and ladies. The conventional picture of Arthurian chivalry is questioned by Gawain's disturbing description of unjust war, and the ghost's grim prophecy of the downfall of the Round Table, but the gloom is dispelled within the structure of the romance by the courteous and charitable behaviour of the court (represented by Gawain and Gaynour) when confronted with a victim of the king's unjust wars, to whom they make restitution, and so restore their own honour. In *Amadace*, the White Knight in his expanded rôle, like the ghost in *Awntyrs*, stresses the connexion between knightly excellence and Christian virtue, which *Amadace* is in danger of forgetting, not through pride or covetousness (like the court in *Awntyrs*), but through hardship and despondency. *Amadace*'s chief virtues: generosity, loyalty, piety, pity, courtesy, are not exclusively chivalric virtues: it is one of the Ireland version's aims to point out how befitting they are to a knight by stressing the knightly status of a man possessing them. *Awntyrs* on the other hand shows the especial need among the knightly class for the gentle virtues of charity and humility. The third romance, *Avowyngge*, treats its subject in a more humorous way than either of the other poems, but with no less serious intent. Like *Awntyrs*, this poem questions the adequacy of conventional, literary, chivalric values, and proposes an alternative interpretation of knightly virtue in terms of more realistic social duties. All three stories stress that true knightly excellence resides in qualities of the spirit, in virtues like charity and courtesy which all gentle men and women ought to possess. So the civilian audience is able to enjoy the traditional entertainments of chivalric romance: the long hand-to-hand combat in *Awntyrs*, the boar hunt, challenges and encounters in *Avowyngge*, the dreadful suspense over the lady's fate in *Amadace*; but at the same time to draw a comfortable moral reassurance from the thought that merely martial prowess is not really all that the old romances made it out to be.



Romantic nostalgia for a lost golden age of chivalry was of course an integral element in the English Arthurian romances, from the prologue to *Ywain and Gawain* to the celebrated elegies of Malory's *Morte Darthur*. But this fifteenth century collection of romances seems to show a more pressing awareness of the discrepancy between chivalric ideals and the real-life behaviour of kings, barons and feudal overlords. In *Awntyrs*, the discrepancy is not fully worked out with all its ironic and satiric potential because, of course, it is a romance and not a social document: the conflict is resolved in a way which satisfies the artistic, not the social demands of the material. Nevertheless, it does show an unusually clear consciousness of the fictional quality of the Arthurian tradition and its chivalric ideals in contrast with the imperfections of real-life feudal society. In *Avowyng* the confrontation is taken further: in the self-conscious imitations of stock romance motifs the author makes use of controlled burlesque to question the relationship of such literary situations with real life, which is represented by the contrast of Bawdewyn's down-to-earth vows and unromantic behaviour. It has been called a bourgeois romance, and indeed it is: what could be more bourgeois than the king's summing-up after Bawdewyn's explanations of his vows?

'In the conne we fynde no fabulle,  
Thine a-vowes arne profetabulle.'

(LXXI)

One must not forget that in *Amadace* the White Knight, the exponent of Christian knighthood, 'the fayrist knygte' who is like 'an angelle', and is Amadace's 'awne true fere', is none other than the dead debtor, who although he outspent a 'nobulle knygte', was in fact a merchant.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The MS is named after the Ireland family of Hale Hall, Lancashire, who owned it from at least the early sixteenth century, shown by the fact that the name Thomas Ireland (1503-45) appears in the marginalia of both parts. It passed by marriage into the Ireland-Blackburne family, with whom it remained until 1945, when Major Gilbert Ireland Blackburne sold it, and it was acquired by the late Dr Martin Bodmer of Coligny, Switzerland. Upon his death in 1971, it was sold by his heirs in order to consolidate the capital of the Bodmer Foundation, to the bookseller H.P. Kraus of New York with whom it at present remains, inaccessible to scholars. But excellent photographs of the three romances had been made in 1933 and are now deposited in the Library of Leeds University.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Dickins, 'The Date of the Ireland MS.', *Leeds Studies in English*, II, 1933, p.65.

<sup>3</sup> R.J. Gates, *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne: A Critical Edition*, Philadelphia, 1969.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p.29.

<sup>5</sup> A. McI. Trounce, 'The English Tail-Rhyme Romances', *Medium Aevum*, I, 1932, pp.87-108, 168-82; II, 1933, pp.34-57, 189-98; III, 1934, pp.30-50.

<sup>6</sup> There is an interesting passage in *Sir Perceval of Gales*, 11.407-412:

'If I solde a knyghte keene,  
Telles me wharby'.  
Scho schewede hym the menevaire,  
Scho had robes in payre,  
'Sone, ther thou sees this fare  
In thaire hodes lye'.

Ed. J.O. Halliwell, *The Thornton Romances*, Camden Society, London, 1844.

<sup>7</sup> W. Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative "Morte Arthure"*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960, pp.151-177.

<sup>8</sup> The MSS do not agree over fitt divisions. MS Lambeth has none; MS Thornton (which is incomplete) has only two fitts (I & XXX); MS Douce has three (I, XXVII, XL) of which the second is obviously chronological and the third seems pointless. MS Ireland has three (I, XXI, & XL), each of which has a clear dramatic significance: XXI marks the transition from the ghost's *memento mori* warning to the prophecies, and by Ireland's omission of XXXIX, XL marks the beginning of the fight.

<sup>9</sup> G. Mathew, 'Ideals of Knighthood in Late-14th-century England', in *Studies in Mediaeval History Presented to F.M. Powicke*, ed. R.W. Hunt et al., Oxford, 1948, pp. 354-62.

<sup>10</sup> *The History of Oliver of Castile*, ed. R.E. Graves, Roxburghe Club, London, 1898.

<sup>11</sup> E. Greenlaw, 'The Vows of Baldwin', *PMLA*, 1906, pp. 575-636.

<sup>12</sup> Something of the self-conscious use of traditional material in this poem can be seen in Kay's cheerful acceptance of his own boastful character (XXIII), particularly when contrasted with a conventional passage such as *Ywain and Gawain*, ll. 68ff.

<sup>13</sup> The story is of the fabliau type, and has close analogues in Latin (in the *Poetria* of Johannes de Garlandia) and in French (the story 'D'une Seule Fame') in A. de Montaiglon, *Recueil Général et Complet des Fabliaux*, Paris, 1872, I, pp. 294-300.